

The paradox of green cred

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My office shares a floor with the Sierra Club. So oftentimes the shared men's room on the floor is dark when I enter it. The lights have been turned off, either as an act of energy conservation or as a gentle reminder to the rest of us, or both. I don't mind this. I simply turn the lights on. And I usually remember to turn them off again as I leave.

So if darkening the men's room is meant to prime green thinking, it works. And not just green thinking—communal behavior as well. I feel better when I'm reminded to turn out the lights, like I'm doing my part.

But how far does such persuasion go? After all, switching the lights off costs me nothing. What if I make a real sacrifice, buying a hybrid or suffering without the AC? Will that make me even a better citizen?

There are theoretical reasons to think not. Gentle reminders may prime our communitarian impulses, but actual sacrifices may have the opposite, paradoxical, effect. Sacrifices may trigger out moral thermostat, giving us the license to act badly in some other unrelated domain.

That, at least, is the idea that two University of Toronto psychologists recently set out to test in the laboratory. Nina Mazar and Chen-Bo Zhong first tested the effects of mere exposure to green products, which symbolize high ethical and humanitarian values. They had volunteers visit on-line stores, some offering mostly environmentally friendly products, the others mostly conventional products. No purchases were made; the volunteers just “walked” the aisles of one store or the other.

Hanging around the eco-store is the equivalent of seeing a conservation advertisement on TV, or entering a darkened men's room. And its effects were striking. The volunteers who were primed for green thinking were much more altruistic in a subsequent task; they gave away more money than average. In short, they were more cooperative citizens.

But here's the interesting part. When they had the volunteers actually make purchases in the two different stores, the results were reversed. That is, the volunteers who made green purchases were more self-centered later on. It's as if making a moral sacrifice establishes moral credentials, which subsequently licenses deviant behavior. Or put another way, we build up moral chits, which we can redeem later by acting selfishly.

If you think that's disturbing, it gets worse. In a separate experiment, the psychologists created the same shopping scenario, with some making green purchases and others conventional purchases. Then they had them participate in an elaborate game. The details are complicated, but the game basically created an opportunity for volunteers to profit by lying about their performance on a task—and also to steal money from a till. And they did both. As [reported on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*](#), those with green

cred were bigger liars and thieves, presumably because they believed they had “earned” the right to transgress with impunity.